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*U.S. Nuclear  
Declaratory Policy*

*The Question of  
Nuclear First Use*

*David Gompert, Kenneth W  
Dean Wilkening*

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*David Gompert, Kenneth Watman,  
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## PREFACE

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The motivation behind this reexamination of American nuclear declaratory policy is the striking absence of deterrence from the debate over how to counter the widening threat from nuclear, biological, and chemical “weapons of mass destruction.” Understandably, current counterproliferation policy has concentrated on ways to defend against this threat. However, given the widespread proliferation of these weapons and their means of delivery, the cost of totally effective defenses will be prohibitive. At the same time, not enough has been done to warn hostile regimes what the United States might do if American troops or friends abroad, let alone U.S. territory, were attacked with weapons of mass destruction. Thus, too much reliance is being placed on the surety of defense and too little on the utility of deterrence. Finally, the authors were motivated by the belief that a sound nuclear declaratory policy not only helps deter threats against U.S. interests but also advances the goal of slowing the spread of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.

This report reexamines the doctrine of nuclear “first use” that figured centrally in American and NATO strategy for decades. Specifically, it argues for the adoption of a U.S. declaratory policy that renounces the first use of any weapon of mass destruction. This research was sponsored with RAND corporate funds in the interest of furthering discussion and debate on future U.S. nuclear weapons policy. It has benefited from a broader investigation of deterrence in the post-Cold War era conducted by two of the authors—Kenneth Watman and Dean Wilkening.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Kenneth Watman and Dean Wilkening, *U.S. Regional Deterrence Strategies*, MR-490-A/AF, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 1995; and Dean Wilkening and Kenneth Watman, *Nuclear Deterrence in a Regional Context*, MR-500-A/AF, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 1995.

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## SUMMARY

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Current American declaratory policy regarding the use of nuclear weapons, formulated during the midst of the Cold War, is both out of date and unnecessarily vague—particularly with respect to biological and chemical threats. While the Soviet threat has receded, a different threat has appeared. Weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—nuclear, biological, and chemical—are spreading, frequently to nations hostile to the United States. Biological weapons can be nearly as horrible in their effects as nuclear weapons; and chemical weapons, though less destructive, are more easily acquired and more likely to be used.

In response, much attention and investment is being directed toward improving the means to destroy enemy weapons of mass destruction preemptively or in flight. But attaining complete confidence in these means to protect the United States and its interests from WMD threats is likely to be beyond the fiscal grasp of the United States within current and projected defense budgets. Hence, it is essential to rely on deterrence to minimize the chance that weapons of mass destruction will be used against the United States, its troops overseas, or its allies.

Having committed itself not to keep biological and chemical weapons, the United States now finds nuclear and conventional retaliatory threats to be the only means available to deter WMD attacks. Sole reliance on U.S. conventional retaliatory threats to deter WMD attacks will not assure deterrence, especially against adversaries already facing or prepared to face conventional strikes. Consequently, it is prudent for the United States to reserve the right

to use nuclear weapons in retaliation for any WMD attack as part of its declaratory policy, especially if the consequences of such attacks are severe (e.g., biological or chemical attacks against unprotected populations). Moreover, such a policy would remove some of the uncertainty regarding U.S. responses to biological and chemical attacks—an uncertainty that derives from current U.S. assurances that the United States will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states (even if they use biological or chemical weapons).

In addition, this report calls for a change in U.S. declaratory policy from one that reserves the right to use nuclear weapons first to one that promises not to use any weapon of mass destruction first. The United States has emerged from the Cold War as the world's preeminent conventional military power, which suggests that the United States is well equipped to deter or defeat conventional attacks using conventional weapons alone. A U.S. promise not to use nuclear weapons against conventional attacks would go far toward refuting the criticism of non-nuclear-weapons states that the United States unfairly insists that others forswear nuclear weapons while remaining free itself to use them whenever it sees fit.

Besides committing the United States not to use nuclear weapons against conventional attacks, this policy would send a message that any nation using any type of weapon of mass destruction against U.S. interests could suffer a U.S. nuclear response. By embracing the principle that the only legitimate use of weapons of mass destruction is in response to a WMD attack, the United States would strengthen deterrence. At the same time it would reduce the incentive some states may have for acquiring weapons of mass destruction, namely to intimidate the United States and U.S. allies. Hence, a no-WMD-first-use declaratory policy would be a wise step as the United States redefines the role of nuclear weapons in the emerging security environment.



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**INTRODUCTION**

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Nuclear deterrence was a fixture of U.S. national security strategy throughout the Cold War. It had two purposes: to deter nuclear attack on the United States and U.S. allies; and to deter the most serious non-nuclear threat the nation faced, an attack on Western Europe by superior Soviet conventional forces. While the first purpose transcends the end of the Cold War, not so the second. Not only is the Soviet conventional threat to Europe gone, but the United States today finds itself the world's premier conventional military power.

Now, however, the United States faces a growing threat to its allies, its forces, and itself from the spread of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, along with missiles capable of delivering these weapons of mass destruction (WMD). At issue, then, is the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in deterring not only nuclear, but biological and chemical attacks.

The central idea of this report is that the United States should adopt a declaratory policy stating that it will never be the first country to use any weapon of mass destruction in a future conflict. This policy would place adversaries on notice that the United States might use nuclear weapons in retaliation if American interests are attacked with weapons of mass destruction first. At the same time, this policy would pledge not to use nuclear weapons in response to a purely conventional attack. This would be a major change in U.S. declaratory policy, responding to new global security conditions.

## **WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION IN THE EMERGING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT**

The know-how to make all three types of weapons of mass destruction is more accessible than ever. Nuclear explosive material is more abundant than ever; chemical weapons are already in the arsenals of several states; and the appearance of usable biological weapons is not at all far-fetched. The United States cannot completely halt the spread of weapons of mass destruction and missile technology, and some states already possessing or determined to acquire such capabilities will be hostile to the United States. As a result, the United States, its forces, and its allies may be threatened with WMD attacks from enemies attempting either to deter U.S. intervention in a regional conflict, intimidate their neighbors, or avert total defeat in the midst of an ongoing war—threats that will present serious problems for American defense plans and operations.<sup>1</sup>

The danger posed by weapons of mass destruction has created interest in the U.S. defense establishment in options to protect the United States and its allies from these threats. The United States is investing in conventional precision-strike capabilities to destroy the opponent's WMD capabilities preemptively and in a variety of theater missile defense options to destroy weapons of mass destruction in flight. Ideally, the United States would have a battery of such capabilities that could, with high confidence, guarantee that no weapons of mass destruction land on targets of value to the United States, thereby neutralizing this growing threat. But pursuing these damage-limiting options to such an extent will be prohibitively

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<sup>1</sup>Nuclear weapons are, of course, the most physically destructive, but biological and chemical weapons can cause very high casualties if used against unprotected facilities or urban areas. In fact, deaths resulting from a single biological weapon targeted against a population center, assuming favorable atmospheric conditions, could be higher than fatalities from a single nuclear bomb. Hence, these three weapon types are lumped together under the rubric of weapons of mass destruction. Importantly, chemical or biological attacks are probably more likely to occur than nuclear attacks, owing to the perception that the former will produce less severe retaliation. Indeed, in recent uses of chemical weapons—for example, Saddam's attack on the Kurds during the Iran-Iraq war—the user paid little or no price. Therefore, the threat from all three types of weapons must be addressed, especially since the threat is all too plausible in the two theaters that dominate current U.S. war planning: the Persian Gulf and Korea.

costly. Conversely, any array of damage-limiting options that the United States can afford will, to be realistic, fall short of an assurance of complete protection.

The high cost of even less-than-perfect protection against weapons of mass destruction makes it critical that the United States dissuade countries from using such weapons in the first place. In particular, the United States should have retaliatory options to deter the use of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons by threatening severe consequences.

## DETECTING WMD THREATS

Deterrence is a complex matter that depends on the credibility of retaliatory threats, the adversary's perception of the consequences of retaliation, and, in the case of nuclear retaliatory options, the role the United States would like nuclear weapons to play—and not play—in world politics. This report focuses on one crucial aspect of deterrence: what the United States should say about *when* and *why* it might use nuclear weapons.

There are strong inhibitions against discussing the use of nuclear weapons, especially for the only country that has actually used them and that now prefers they recede from the world stage. Nonetheless, it is crucial to get declaratory policy right. In the future, enemies of the United States will form views about whether and under what circumstances American nuclear weapons might be used—views that could decide whether they take hostile action against American interests. What the United States itself has to say on the matter is the surest way of affecting their views, and thus their actions.

Unfortunately, what the United States has had to say on the matter of late has been anything but clear. The recent U.S. Nuclear Policy Review appears vaguely to have retained the NATO nuclear policy of first use, wherein U.S. nuclear weapons may be used to halt conventional attacks, if only as a “last resort.” At the same time, the United States has reiterated a “negative security assurance” to non-nuclear states—promising to refrain from nuclear threats against non-nuclear states so long as they are not allied with a state armed with

nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup> These two policies contradict one another on the increasingly critical issue of whether the United States reserves the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons against biological and chemical attacks. While some calculated ambiguity about U.S. retaliatory intentions serves a useful purpose, deterrence is not well served if U.S. declaratory policy is so unclear that aggressors do not understand the possible consequences of using biological and chemical weapons.

The problem of deterring WMD attacks by other states against U.S. territory is essentially no different, and no more difficult, than it was during the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> Hence, adversaries have little reason to question whether the United States reserves the right to respond with nuclear weapons if the U.S. homeland is attacked directly with nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons first.

However, extending deterrence to protect U.S. troops overseas, and U.S. friends and allies, from WMD attacks may prove to be more difficult because U.S. interests are not as directly engaged—particularly in those regions of the world where U.S. interests are not perceived to be vital.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, extending credible deterrence to allies and other U.S. interests abroad is made easier than during the Cold War by the limited ability of most regional opponents with newly

<sup>2</sup>The negative security assurance announced to the United Nations by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance on June 12, 1978, which is still in effect, states that: "The United States will not use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear-weapons state party to the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) or any comparable internationally binding commitment not to acquire nuclear explosive devices, except in the case of an attack on the United States, its territories or armed forces, or its allies, by such a state allied to a nuclear-weapons state or associated with a nuclear-weapons state in carrying out or sustaining the attack."

<sup>3</sup>WMD attacks by terrorist groups would be more difficult to deter unless these groups could be identified and their organizational and physical structure specified in sufficient detail to allow the United States to make credible retaliatory threats—probably relying on U.S. conventional weapons to minimize collateral damage to innocent populations nearby. Israel has relied for decades on retaliatory threats to deter terrorist attacks—with partial success.

<sup>4</sup>It was precisely doubts about the credibility of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence that prompted the United States and its NATO allies in the early 1980s to deploy to Europe nuclear-armed Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles capable of reaching the territory of the former Soviet Union.

acquired weapons of mass destruction to reach the American homeland. Thus, extended deterrence in the new era may be difficult to achieve but is by no means impossible, given the right declaratory policy.

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**U.S. DECLARATORY POLICY ALTERNATIVES**

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The principal function of declaratory policy is to suggest the circumstances under which the United States will consider specific retaliatory options. Put another way, it signals U.S. perceptions of the gravity of specific acts by announcing those retaliatory options the United States might exercise. Declaratory policy should be consistent with strategy. For the United States to threaten to do what it is not prepared to do carries substantial risk because subsequent threats carry less weight once U.S. resolve is tested and the United States is caught bluffing.

At the same time, declaratory policy should not bind the United States to specific retaliatory actions. Having reserved the right to respond in a specified manner, the United States may not respond in this way if U.S. leaders determine that circumstances warrant otherwise. For example, if the United States reserves the right to respond to chemical attacks by retaliating with nuclear weapons, this should not imply that the United States must do so under all circumstances. Obviously, a single chemical artillery shell fired at U.S. troops, causing perhaps a few tens of casualties, would not draw a U.S. nuclear response. Reserving the right to respond to WMD attacks with nuclear weapons puts adversaries on notice that the United States considers these to be heinous acts of aggression, while leaving sufficient ambiguity so U.S. leaders can flexibly tailor their response to fit the specific circumstances.

One obvious declaratory policy is to reserve the option of responding in kind. Such "tit-for-tat" retaliatory strategies are often thought to be credible because the response is, by definition, proportionate to

the attack. Thus, U.S. nuclear responses are credible for deterring nuclear attack; biological and chemical retaliation would be used to deter biological and chemical threats, respectively; and conventional responses would be used to deter conventional attacks, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Despite the logical appeal of a tit-for-tat strategy, it was not U.S. declaratory policy during the Cold War. Rather, NATO relied heavily on nuclear threats to deter nuclear, biological, chemical, and conventional threats (in addition to tit-for-tat threats), as illustrated in Figure 2. Most notably, Western conventional defense disadvantages in Europe caused the United States to rely on the threat to initiate nuclear war to deter a Soviet conventional attack against NATO allies. To protect this option, the United States consistently rejected a nuclear no-first-use policy despite pressures to adopt such a policy to reduce the perceived utility of nuclear weapons.

Tit-for-tat threats cannot be the basis for U.S. declaratory policy in the post-Cold War era for the simple reason that the United States is, and should remain, committed to eliminating all chemical weapons from its arsenal. Biological weapons have already been removed. In addition, the United States has unilaterally declared that it will not use biological or chemical weapons under any circumstances. Hence, the United States will have only conventional and nuclear re-

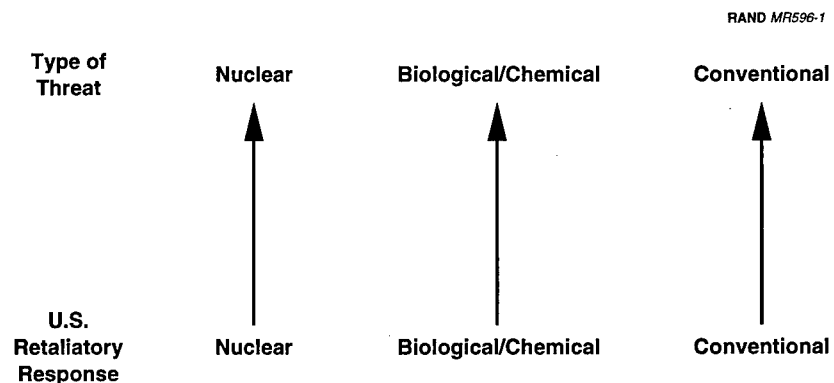


Figure 1—Tit-for-Tat Retaliatory Doctrine

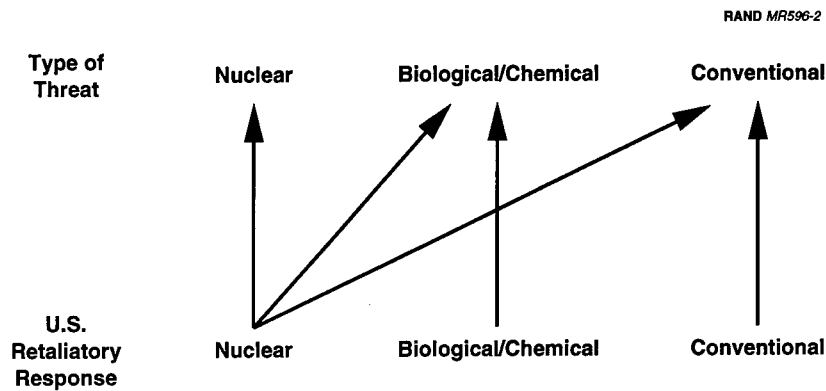


Figure 2—NATO Declaratory Policy

taliatory options available to deter future threats, including biological and chemical threats.

One new approach would be for the United States explicitly to reserve the option to retaliate with nuclear weapons to deter any WMD attacks, and to link conventional retaliation exclusively to conventional threats, as illustrated in Figure 3, regardless of whether or not the opponent is allied with a nuclear-armed state. Such a policy

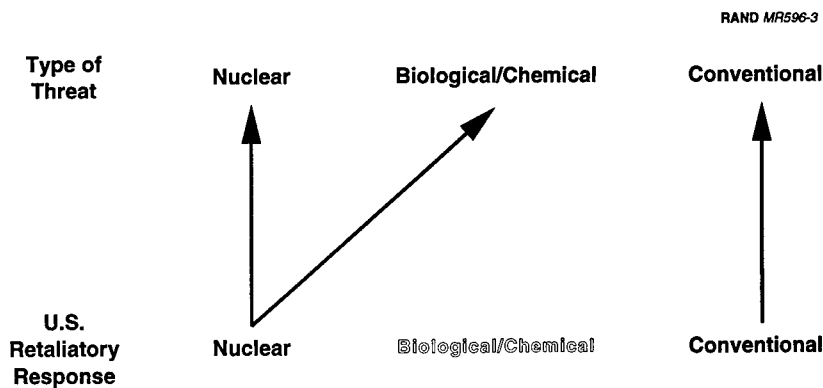


Figure 3—U.S. Nuclear Retaliation Against WMD Threats



would rule out using weapons of mass destruction except in response to a WMD attack. The United States could either adopt this as a unilateral declaratory policy or, going further, elevate it to the level of a pledge to which others would also be encouraged to subscribe. In the extreme, if all countries signed and complied with such a pledge, weapons of mass destruction would never again be used.

In an alternative new approach, the United States could reduce even further its reliance on nuclear threats for deterrence and correspondingly increase the role of conventional retaliatory options, deterring chemical and biological attacks by U.S. conventional responses alone, as shown in Figure 4. Nuclear weapons, in this case, would be relegated solely to deterring nuclear attacks on the United States, U.S. forces, or U.S. allies. The value of such a posture is that it would enable the United States to take the lead in “retiring” nuclear weapons from all roles except to deter the use of nuclear weapons. If, in this case, all countries followed the U.S. example, nuclear weapons would never again be used (unless, of course, the pledge were broken).

In theory, the United States could go a step—more accurately, a huge leap—further and rely solely on its superior conventional capability to deter all forms of attack, as illustrated in Figure 5. This doctrine would eschew nuclear use *under any circumstances*. This declaratory

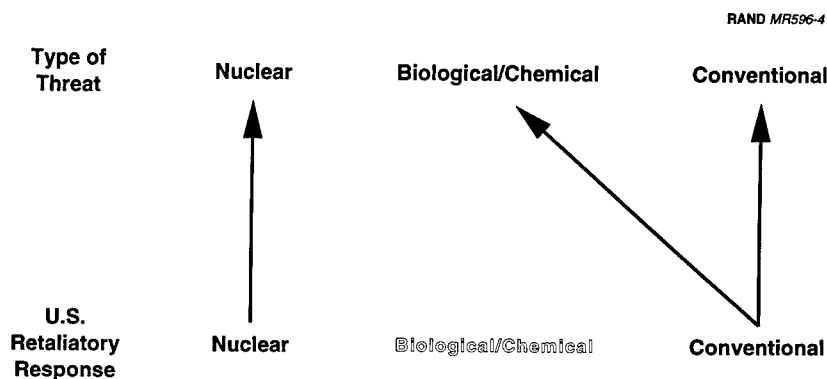


Figure 4—No First Use of Nuclear Weapons

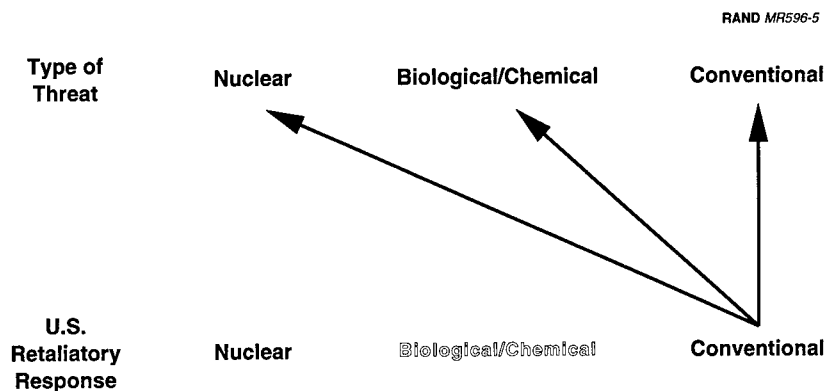


Figure 5—No Nuclear Use Under Any Circumstances

policy could be invoked against states possessing weapons of mass destruction, presumably with small arsenals, or it could be held up as the goal of a long-term strategy aimed at abolishing all deliverable weapons of mass destruction worldwide. If a global ban on all weapons of mass destruction were in place, U.S. conventional retaliatory threats would then serve to deter WMD attacks from any state that either violated the ban or broke out of the ban so quickly that the United States could not reconstitute its nuclear capability in time to respond with nuclear threats.

Of course, as long as other states have nuclear weapons—the number having them is growing, not shrinking—the United States is not likely to rule out nuclear retaliation altogether. A less utopian variant might be to threaten a nuclear response only in the event of a nuclear attack on the U.S. homeland, with extended deterrence of any attack against American forces or U.S. allies provided by conventional means alone. The principal drawback of this variant is that it may not reassure U.S. allies because they inevitably would question the adequacy of U.S. conventional threats to deter nuclear attacks against lesser U.S. interests (themselves) when sole reliance on conventional retaliation had been rejected for deterring such attacks against more important U.S. interests (the U.S. homeland).

Some will argue against changing current declaratory policy and against clarifying the connection between WMD attacks and poten-

tial U.S. nuclear responses, stressing the need to keep all options open and the potential for international controversy if the United States addresses the question of when it would and would not consider using nuclear weapons. Indeed, the United States could leave untouched the existing first-use doctrine while responding vaguely to the growing danger of chemical and biological weapons. Such a policy would simply stress that any country using a weapon of mass destruction against the United States or U.S. allies would suffer dire consequences, with the means left unspecified.

The main defects of such a vague stance are, first, that it fails to exploit effectively the enormous deterrent value of nuclear retaliation and, second, that it keeps in place a vestige of the Cold War (i.e., a nuclear first-use policy to deter conventional attacks) that legitimizes WMD first use, thereby undermining the U.S. ability to deter biological and chemical attacks at the very time the spread and possible use of such weapons is of more concern than ever. Indeed, such a vague policy—in essence, the current U.S. policy—in trying to avoid controversy produces ineffective deterrence. On balance, clearer is better, as long as it stops short of constraining the United States to respond in a specific way.

## ASSESSING THE ALTERNATIVES

Assuming that tit-for-tat threats are reasonably credible, the United States should be relatively confident of its ability to deter nuclear and conventional attacks in the future because it can respond in kind. However, the United States will have to rely on dissimilar threats to deter biological and chemical attacks because the United States will not have these weapons in its arsenal. Therefore, the question becomes, How credible are alternative declaratory policies in the mind of the adversary?

*Credibility* is determined by two factors: whether the adversary believes the United States *will* do what it says it will do, and whether the adversary believes the United States *can* do what it says it will do. The strategy depicted in Figure 3 indicates that the United States reserves the right to cross the nuclear threshold first, though only after the opponent has first attacked with biological or chemical weapons. That the United States can do this is obvious to all. The question is

whether the United States will do this against a weaker, though aggressive, nation that has not used nuclear weapons first.

The *adversary's perception* of U.S. resolve is determined largely by its perception of the U.S. interests at stake. It is likely to find the threat of U.S. nuclear retaliation credible, regardless of whether it used nuclear weapons first, if a vital American interest is threatened. In the extreme, if a U.S. city is struck with biological or chemical weapons causing, say, around a million casualties, the United States might well retaliate with nuclear weapons and, thus, would want the threat of such retaliation to deter these attacks in the first place.

However, if U.S. troops equipped with some passive defenses (e.g., chemical suits, gas masks, vaccines, antidotes, decontamination equipment) are attacked with a few biological or chemical weapons, then the expected casualties might number in the hundreds or less. Under these circumstances, a U.S. nuclear response likely would be disproportionate and, hence, would be less credible. To deter biological and chemical attacks under these circumstances, U.S. conventional retaliation, as depicted in Figure 4, would be more credible. For example, the United States might threaten to escalate its war aims if weapons of mass destruction are used, e.g., by announcing unconditional surrender as a new war aim or threatening to capture the leaders and try them as war criminals after the war.<sup>5</sup> The latter threat was used against Saddam Hussein, although it is difficult to tell what role it played in dissuading him from launching chemical attacks against coalition forces. Between the extremes of massive casualties and only a few casualties lies a range of plausible attack outcomes for which conventional retaliation may be credible but for which the threat of a nuclear response may also be credible and therefore too valuable to discard.

Relying on conventional threats alone to deter biological and chemical attacks under all circumstances, as depicted in Figure 4, has several problems. First, conventional weapons are simply less awesome

<sup>5</sup>The idea of treating WMD first use as a war crime is, of course, impossible for the United States with its current declaratory policy, which does not exclude WMD first use (i.e., nuclear first use against conventional attacks). But with a change in policy to no WMD first use, criminalizing WMD first use could be helpful for a host of reasons, particularly the legitimization of a U.S. nuclear response to the "crime."

to adversaries than nuclear weapons. Second, the deterrent effect of conventional threats is inherently less clear than that of nuclear threats because they rely on numerous imponderables that make the outcome of conventional operations difficult to predict: uncertainties in the technological sophistication and performance of conventional weapons; the level of training and readiness of the troops; the extent of the logistics support for power-projection forces; the quality of targeting intelligence; the effects of weather and terrain; generalship; and the durability of public, allied, and international support for conventional operations, to name a few. U.S. military planners frequently have a difficult time forecasting the outcome and likely costs of conventional operations—witness the range of estimates for the duration and casualties of Operation Desert Storm. In fact, the United States was nearly as surprised as Saddam Hussein with the swiftness and lopsided losses of that conflict.

Third, the limits of conventional deterrence of WMD attacks are especially apparent under circumstances where the attacker already is experiencing the effects of U.S. conventional strikes as part of an ongoing war, or already has decided to risk such strikes. If so, the adversary may believe that threatening, or actually using, weapons of mass destruction has benefits that outweigh the costs and, thus, may be willing to use them.

Finally, conventional retaliatory threats, to be sufficiently compelling, may be costly to implement—politically, financially, and militarily. For example, capturing the opponent's leaders or prosecuting a war by conventional means alone until unconditional surrender is achieved may be difficult to accomplish at an acceptable cost. Hence, relying solely on U.S. conventional retaliatory threats may not be credible because the opponent may doubt U.S. conventional capabilities for achieving such results without incurring unacceptable costs. Consequently, it seems prudent not to rule out the threat of nuclear retaliation to deter—and, if need be, to respond to—not only nuclear attack but also biological and chemical attacks against U.S. interests.

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**PROPOSED U.S. DECLARATORY POLICY**

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Conventional and nuclear retaliatory threats have complementary strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, both threats should be used to deter attacks with biological and chemical weapons, as illustrated in Figure 6. If U.S. nuclear retaliation is viewed by an opponent armed with weapons of mass destruction as frightening but unlikely and if U.S. conventional retaliation is viewed as certain but less frightening, only the combination may be enough to persuade the adversary that using weapons of mass destruction definitely *will* produce a bad result and *might* produce a horrendous result. This posture should suffice to deter acts ranging from limited to uninhibited WMD use: Conventional deterrence would operate mainly at the low end of the spectrum, and nuclear deterrence at the high end. Proportionality, and thus credibility, could be achieved at either end. Such a declaratory policy could be adopted in general and then tailored, through careful statements, to each specific crisis. The relative emphasis on each would depend on the anticipated severity of the attack.

The important point is this: Adversaries should not be given the impression that they can use nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons to threaten U.S. interests without running some risk of a U.S. nuclear response. Because of the availability of conventional retaliatory options, this declaratory policy does not oblige the United States to use nuclear weapons—it simply leaves open the option.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Of course, the option of nuclear retaliation is always open, technically speaking, so long as U.S. nuclear weapons exist. However, since the U.S. objective is to deter such threats, U.S. declaratory policy better serves U.S. interests if it strengthens the adversary's belief that nuclear weapons will be used in response to a WMD attack. If

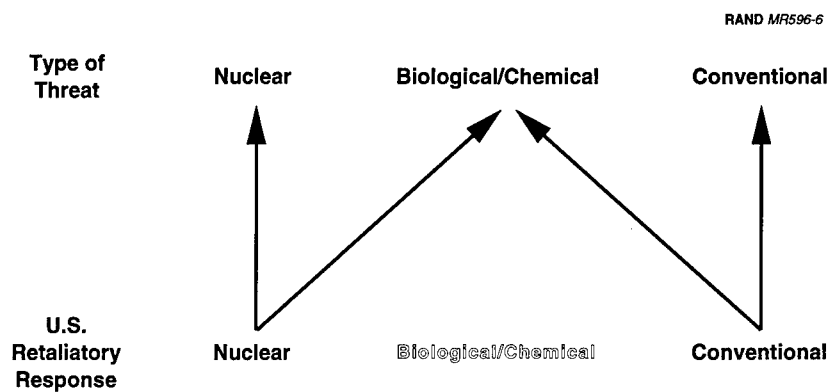


Figure 6—Proposed U.S. Declaratory Policy: No WMD First Use

Such a declaratory policy represents a change from current U.S. policy not only by being explicit about the possibility of a nuclear response to a biological or chemical attack but also by specifying that a nuclear response would be considered *only* in the event that an opponent uses a weapon of mass destruction first. Under a no-WMD-first-use policy, U.S. nuclear retaliatory threats would not be made against a state engaged in a purely conventional conflict with U.S. forces or a U.S. ally, even if that state possesses weapons of mass destruction or is allied with a state that possesses such weapons.

This policy implies that, if U.S. forces are about to be overrun by an opponent's conventional forces in some theater, the United States would either attempt to reinforce these forces, withdraw, or threaten conventional retaliatory strikes to deter further attacks. Failing in each of these, the United States would suffer this defeat without resort to nuclear threats to deter it or nuclear use to retaliate for it. Similarly, under the suggested policy, the United States would no longer be able to provide nuclear guarantees to friends and allies that come under the threat of purely conventional attacks. Instead, the United States would have to bring superior conventional military

the United States remains silent on this issue, doubts about U.S. resolve with respect to nuclear retaliation can easily enter the adversary's mind.

force to bear, i.e., rely on conventional deterrence and defense, to protect U.S. interests from purely conventional threats.<sup>7</sup>

### POTENTIAL DRAWBACKS

The proposed U.S. declaratory policy raises several related issues. First, NATO still has on its books a doctrine that leaves open the possibility that the United States will initiate nuclear use to prevent Western Europe from being overrun. This nuclear first-use policy is assumed to apply in other contexts as well (e.g., South Korea). Of course, the Warsaw Pact has ceased to exist and the conventional threat to Western Europe has vanished; so this element of U.S. and NATO declaratory policy is anachronistic and likely to remain so. The current course of events would have to change radically for a large conventional military threat to reappear on Europe's doorstep (e.g., a resurgent conventional military threat from an unreformed and unfriendly Russia). Similarly, the United States and South Korea are better able to defend against a conventional attack by North Korea now that Russia and China are no longer close allies of Pyongyang, and the conventional balance on the Korean peninsula is, if anything, likely to improve given North Korea's desperate economic condition.

Of course, it may be necessary to anticipate extending deterrence to new allies, for example, Poland in an expanded NATO alliance. Poland stands on the traditional invasion route between Central Europe and Russia. If Poland were to join NATO, the United States would offer a defense commitment. Upon the reappearance of a Russian threat to Poland, the need for nuclear deterrence of conventional aggression would again arise, unless the United States and the

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<sup>7</sup>An interesting potential exception to a no-WMD-first-use policy occurs if the United States deploys nuclear-tipped interceptors for ballistic missile defense—presumably to enhance the effectiveness of such defenses against biological and chemical warheads because conventional explosives may not denature the toxic agents. In this case, the United States may be in the position of detonating a nuclear explosion before it has complete knowledge about the nature of the attack. This, of course, does not constitute a retaliatory use of nuclear weapons and may be discounted for this reason. In addition, if a WMD attack has been confirmed (e.g., by the detonation of a single WMD warhead), then there is no inconsistency between the subsequent use of nuclear-tipped ballistic missile interceptors and a no-WMD-first-use policy.



rest of NATO possessed a conventional force sufficient to deter or defeat the threat.

A second, related point is that if the United States adopts a declaratory policy that excludes the first use of weapons of mass destruction, Poland (in this example) might take an interest in obtaining its own nuclear capability. This proliferation incentive has occurred in the past, specifically with respect to South Korea and Taiwan when these states began to doubt U.S. security commitments. The United States eventually prevailed on South Korea and Taiwan to forgo their independent nuclear programs by bolstering its security assurances and extending nuclear deterrence. Thus, one might be concerned that the declaratory policy suggested here would encourage nuclear proliferation among U.S. allies.

Still, this potential drawback appears manageable in today's environment. In particular, Poland and other prospective new members of NATO are hardly likely to decline membership over this issue or to acquire nuclear weapons (which would damage if not destroy their hopes for membership), especially knowing that Russia cannot regain conventional superiority. In any case, if these circumstances change significantly in the future, U.S. declaratory policy would need to be reviewed.<sup>8</sup>

A third issue is whether a U.S. no-WMD-first-use policy would place unwanted political pressure on U.S. friends or allies that might wish to retain the option of nuclear first use to deter conventional attacks, e.g., France, Great Britain, and Israel (if Israel ever announced such a declaratory policy). Although U.S. allies are almost certainly not of one mind on this issue, they may well agree that the proliferation of biological and chemical weapons represents a more serious threat to their interests than any lingering conventional threats. For example,

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<sup>8</sup>It is easier politically to sever the link between U.S. nuclear first use and conventional threats than to reinstate it in the future; however, this does not mean that such a reversal is impossible. It depends on future circumstances. If a conventional threat to U.S. vital interests of the magnitude faced by NATO during the Cold War reappears, it may be quite easy to reverse U.S. declaratory policy. For more ambiguous conventional threats, reversal might be difficult. However, retaining a nuclear first-use policy is not without costs. In our opinion, the advantages of eschewing U.S. nuclear first use against conventional threats in favor of a more coherent U.S. policy aimed at countering near-term biological and chemical threats outweigh the risk associated with uncertain future conventional threats.

the collapse of the Warsaw Pact has eliminated the conventional military threat to France and Great Britain, and progress toward peace in the Middle East has reduced the potential for war against Israel. On the other hand, the proliferation of ballistic missiles in the Middle East and North Africa could well pose a serious threat to each of these states if the missiles are armed with nuclear, biological, or chemical warheads. Hence, these allies may also find a no-WMD-first-use policy beneficial and may be willing to eschew nuclear first use against purely conventional threats to bolster deterrence against WMD threats. In any case, the United States and these allies have never shared and do not currently share identical declaratory policies, and the prospect of future differences should not keep the United States from reforming its policy.

A fourth issue is whether a U.S. president will become less willing to send U.S. forces overseas to protect U.S. interests if nuclear threats cannot be used to avert their defeat at the hands of an opponent with locally superior conventional forces. Yet, presidents frequently commit U.S. forces to signal American commitments when there is no intention of saving those forces from defeat by making nuclear, as opposed to conventional, threats. Macedonia currently is a case in point. Most importantly, U.S. presidents are unlikely to commit conventional forces to regional conflicts unless they can prevail on the battlefield, be rapidly reinforced, or be withdrawn if they are about to be overrun. Hence, it is unlikely that a no-WMD-first-use declaratory policy would adversely affect the commitment of U.S. conventional forces to protect overseas interests.

A fifth, frequently raised issue is whether policies that retain the option to use nuclear weapons first, if only to deter biological and chemical attacks, encourage WMD proliferation, thereby undermining U.S. nonproliferation policy. True, such a policy makes it difficult for the United States to declare that nuclear weapons have no practical, justifiable use. It may seem hypocritical for the United States to find useful deterrent roles for nuclear weapons while claiming that other states should not acquire weapons of mass destruction. This argument has rhetorical appeal. But the underlying premise—that the existence of, and threat to use, U.S. nuclear weapons create incentives for other states to acquire weapons of mass destruction—has never been adequately examined and, in any case, is suspect for several reasons.

First, most WMD proliferation to date—e.g., by China, India, Pakistan, South Africa, North Korea, Israel, and several Arab states—has occurred because of regional security concerns that have little to do with the U.S. nuclear arsenal or U.S. policies that appear to legitimize nuclear weapons.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the fact that the United States is the world's dominant conventional military power is sufficient cause for some states to acquire weapons of mass destruction as an equalizer. In particular, such states may be more inclined to acquire biological or chemical weapons if they knew the United States eschewed nuclear threats to deter their use, thereby opening up the possibility that biological and chemical threats could be used to dissuade the United States from intervening in their regional affairs.

Finally, the incentives U.S. allies have to acquire independent WMD capabilities are inversely related to the U.S. willingness to use its nuclear capabilities on their behalf. Nuclear forces enable the United States to credibly extend deterrence to its allies, thereby reducing the allies' incentives to acquire their own WMD arsenals—as mentioned above. Similarly, the threat to withdraw U.S. security guarantees if indigenous WMD programs are discovered gives the United States considerable leverage to discourage proliferation among its allies. Therefore, it is the very willingness of the United States to use nuclear weapons that creates disincentives for allied proliferation and

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<sup>9</sup>China may have acquired nuclear weapons in 1960 because of veiled U.S. nuclear threats to end the Korean War and to resolve the Quemoy-Matsu crises. However, China also acquired nuclear weapons because of Russia. India developed nuclear explosives largely in response to Chinese threats, especially after the 1962 Sino-Indian war. Pakistan, in turn, developed nuclear weapons in response to the Indian threat. South Africa apparently developed nuclear weapons out of concern for a Soviet-backed invasion by one or more of her African neighbors. The North Korean nuclear program may have been prompted by U.S. nuclear guarantees to South Korea, although growing South Korean conventional military power and North Korea's traditional emphasis on self-reliance probably made the north's decision to pursue nuclear weapons inevitable in any case. Similarly, Israel has presumably developed nuclear weapons in response to the substantial threat that her Arab neighbors have posed to her security, and the Arab states have presumably developed chemical and biological weapons to neutralize Israel's nuclear capability. Iran developed chemical weapons in the mid-1980s because she was attacked with chemical weapons by Iraq during the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War. India, Pakistan, Israel, and the Arab states have not acquired weapons of mass destruction because of the existence of U.S. nuclear weapons.

not the other way around. If U.S. security guarantees no longer exist, South Korea, Japan, Germany, Turkey, Italy, and Spain—not to mention such traditional friends as Taiwan—might acquire their own weapons of mass destruction. Just as American allies were willing to rely on U.S. extended deterrence to shield them from the principal threat—Soviet conventional power—during the Cold War, they would presumably welcome extended deterrence to shield them from growing regional WMD threats in today's world.

Thus, while it is true that the United States would be better off in a world where no more states acquire weapons of mass destruction, it is far from clear that by eschewing nuclear use the United States would help bring about such a world. Equally, if not more, likely is that other states would have a greater incentive to acquire such weapons to counterbalance what they perceive to be the preponderance of U.S. conventional military power or, in the case of U.S. allies, to provide for their own security by acquiring weapons of mass destruction in the absence of a convincing U.S. extended deterrent. As long as continued acquisition of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons seems likely, the United States should retain nuclear response options to deter their use. This is simply putting current U.S. nuclear capability to good use to help cope with what appears to be one of the most serious U.S. post-Cold War security problems.

## **BENEFITS**

The dominant goal in the new era should be to deter the use of increasingly widespread weapons of mass destruction. The principal advantage of the no-WMD-first-use declaratory policy shown in Figure 6 is that it makes explicit the connection between an opponent's use of biological and chemical weapons and the possibility of a U.S. nuclear response—a connection that currently is too vague to discourage such attacks because of U.S. negative security assurances. This advantage is strengthened by also breaking the link between an opponent's conventional threats and a U.S. nuclear response—a link far less important now than during the Cold War.

The United States cannot, on the one hand, claim that WMD first use justifies a nuclear response and, on the other hand, hold open the option of using nuclear weapons first to deter conventional attacks. Thus, by ceding the option of nuclear first use against conventional

threats, the United States is in a stronger position to argue that the sole acceptable use of weapons of mass destruction is to deter the use of weapons of mass destruction.

Because this policy delegitimizes WMD first use, it should improve the U.S. chances of successfully deterring WMD threats. Knowing that the United States considers WMD first use to be illegitimate, adversaries contemplating such use are apt to believe that the United States will respond with greater force, including possible nuclear retaliation, if WMD attacks occur. In addition, if no-WMD-first-use is widely endorsed, the United States would have support in the international community to respond to WMD attacks with nuclear weapons, further enhancing the credibility of U.S. retaliatory threats, as well as softening the international reaction against the United States if it ever had to carry out such a threat.

The question of whether the United States should actually use nuclear weapons in retaliation, as opposed to simply declaring that it will if an opponent uses biological or chemical weapons first, is a difficult one. The argument has been made that to do so legitimizes the use of nuclear weapons—the first use in conflict since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, not responding in a forceful manner in effect sanctions the use of biological and chemical weapons in the future, and could be interpreted by future adversaries to mean that the United States can effectively be coerced by such threats.

Again, whether U.S. leaders would actually use nuclear weapons after an opponent uses weapons of mass destruction first depends on the severity of the initial WMD attack and on the U.S. conventional response options available at the time. If the attack is light, e.g., against protected troops, or if powerful conventional responses are available, then U.S. conventional responses would be preferred, which is why the declaratory policy should refer to *either* nuclear or conventional responses. But, if the gravity of the situation demands nuclear use, the U.S. president should have nuclear options available and under consideration. Such a response would serve to reduce greatly any future incentive opponents might have to use nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons first. Indeed, once a weapon of mass destruction is used, the single act most likely to discourage further use would be nuclear retaliation.

Finally, the proposed declaratory policy should not undermine but instead advance U.S. interests in retarding the spread of weapons of mass destruction. By forgoing the option of using nuclear weapons in the face of a conventional attack, the United States would largely meet the criticism of non-nuclear states that they are being asked to forgo nuclear weapons even though the United States holds open the option to use them at will. The shift in U.S. policy proposed here should thus give a boost to U.S. non-proliferation policy in general, if not the prospects for an indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty at the April 17–May 12, 1995, Treaty review conference. Moreover, by warning that the use of biological and chemical weapons against U.S. interests could provoke a nuclear response, this policy would weaken somewhat the perceived utility of biological and chemical weapons and, thus, the incentive to acquire them.

In the interest of strengthening a WMD non-proliferation regime, the United States could further announce that it would never use nuclear weapons against a state that signs and complies with the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Biological Weapons Convention, and the Chemical Weapons Convention, and that does not assist in any way terrorist groups that might threaten to use weapons of mass destruction. This would add to the international legitimacy of the proposed policy, encourage acceptance of WMD non-proliferation norms, and concentrate the policy's effects on those states who refuse to accept and live by these norms.

## CONCLUSIONS

The massive Soviet conventional military threat has been replaced by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction as the most urgent U.S. security concern. Total reliance on high-confidence defensive options and preemptive conventional counterforce strikes to protect the United States and its allies from WMD threats will likely be beyond the fiscal grasp of the United States within current and projected defense budgets. Similarly, sole reliance on U.S. conventional retaliatory threats to deter WMD attacks may result in deterrence failure, especially against adversaries already prepared to face conventional strikes. Consequently, it seems prudent to reserve nuclear retaliatory options to deter WMD threats but unnecessary to retain such options to respond to conventional threats. For these reasons,

the United States should consider adopting a declaratory policy that places potential adversaries on notice that it might use nuclear weapons if, but only if, the U.S. homeland, U.S. troops, U.S. friends and allies, or other important U.S. interests are attacked with weapons of mass destruction.

Such a policy would strengthen deterrence of nuclear, biological, and chemical attacks at a time when such threats are becoming more widespread and worrisome, at the cost of possibly weakening deterrence of conventional attacks. Fortunately, the United States has emerged from the Cold War with the world's most powerful conventional military force, which suggests that it is well equipped to deter conventional attacks using conventional retaliatory threats alone. Hence, a no-WMD-first-use declaratory policy appears to be a prudent next step as the United States continues to refine the role of nuclear weapons in the emerging security environment.